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Though available data suggest a relationship between poverty and emerging adulthood, fewer studies have been conducted to assess whether parental work or public assistance mediates these outcomes. Using the National Survey of Families and Households, this study examines the effect of work-reliant versus welfare-reliant households on youth outcomes (i.e., welfare use, education, idleness, and income) during the transition to adulthood. Examining parents from Wave 1 and older youth from Wave 2, researchers linked childhood poverty, parents' work history, family income from work, years on public assistance, and family income from public assistance with youth outcomes. Consistent with previous research, links exist between poverty in childhood and transition outcomes; however, these outcomes are not mediated by parental work history or extent of welfare reliance during childhood. Multivariate analyses indicate that growing up in a heavily work-oriented environment or a heavily welfare-reliant environment made little difference in the youth's ability to successfully transition to adulthood. Results are discussed in terms of their implications for welfare policy.

Keywords: *poverty, welfare, adolescent transitions*

There is substantial evidence that growing up in poverty challenges children's optimal development. Children who grow up in low-income families are often in poorer health, less prepared academically, and have less successful transitions to adulthood than their more advantaged peers (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

According to the Census Bureau (2004), for the third year in a row the US poverty rate grew, from 12.1% in 2002 to 12.5% in 2003, moving an additional 1.3 million people into poverty. Considerable research has assessed the impact of public provisions (e.g., cash aid, Medicaid, and food stamps) on these families (e.g. Moffit, Cherlin, Burton, King, & Roff, 2002; Vandivere, Moore, & Brown, 2000). Further, with current welfare policies promoting work, the body of literature related to program efficacy continues to grow. Nevertheless, relatively little is known about the differential effects of work-reliant versus welfare-reliant environments on the outcomes of low-income children.

This study aims to fill that gap by examining the effect household environment during childhood (i.e., work-reliant or welfare-reliant) has on adolescent transitions to adulthood. Areas of interest include future public assistance use, educational attainment, income and idleness (i.e., neither working, in the military, or in school). The central question explored in this study concerns the extent to which these markers of successful transitions to adulthood are shaped by the family's source of income, as well as the adolescent's gender, ethnicity, parental education, and family structure. We expect that the environment poor parents provide for their families, either work-reliant or welfare-reliant, will lead to different outcomes in their children's transitions to adulthood.

Poverty, both directly, through poor nutrition, dangerous neighborhoods, and inadequate housing, and indirectly, through parenting styles, can negatively affect children's life chances. Poor children are more likely to have behavioral and emotional problems, be in fair or poor health, have problems in school, such as increased risk of grade repetition and high school dropout, lower college attendance and fewer total years of education, and live in poor neighborhoods and unhealthy home environments, characterized by exposure to crime and toxins (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sherman, 1997; Vandivere, et al., 2000).

Low-income parents are more likely to be in poor health, both emotionally and physically (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; McLoyd & Wilson, 1990). Parent irritability and depression are associated with more conflictual interactions with adolescents, leading to less satisfactory emotional, social, and cognitive development (Flanagan, 1990; Lutenbacher & Hall, 1998). Children

of depressed mothers typically receive less attention, stimulation, and interaction than children of non-depressed mothers. Parental education, number of siblings, and the presence or absence of two parents is also related to the quality of parent/child interactions and quantity of parent time (i.e., parents with less education are less equipped to stimulate their children's development) (Smith, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1997), and parents with more children have less time to spend with each child (McLanahan, 1997).

Research suggests that the timing and duration of poverty during childhood is also a factor. Long-term poverty produces greater cognitive problems than short-term poverty (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994), and being poor in the first four years of life is associated with greater deficits than not being poor in those years (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

While being poor in early childhood has detrimental consequences during those years, individuals with the fewest resources also have the most difficult time achieving success during emerging adulthood (Besharov, 1999; Duncan, et al., 1994). Between the ages of 16 and 24, youth must negotiate important developmental tasks: finishing school, leaving the home of origin, securing employment and self-sufficiency, and marriage (Shanahan, 2000). Successful transitions involve positive outcomes in the majority of these areas. Furthermore, adolescents must achieve these outcomes while simultaneously avoiding criminality, substance abuse, health and mental health difficulties, and economic challenges, such as unemployment and job instability.

African-American and Latino youth consistently show disproportionate rates of unemployment, higher rates of idleness, and other transition challenges (Brown & Emig, 1999; Powers, 1996). Coming from communities with high rates of unemployment (Census Bureau, 2002b), welfare receipt (National Integrated Control System, 1993), single parenthood (Sugarman, 1998), and low educational attainment (Census Bureau, 2002a), these youth face increased barriers to success. Poor and minority youth are the highest risk group for teenage childbearing (America's children, 2001), are overrepresented in crime (FBI, 2001), have higher unemployment rates (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2002) and have higher rates of idleness than White youth (Powers, 1996).

Research demonstrates that family background, particularly poverty, affects educational and employment outcomes for youth (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994). Additionally, poverty limits the ability of parents to invest in their children, both in terms of economic and social capital (Becker, 1991). Low parental education, poverty, and family welfare receipt have all been associated with high rates of "disconnectedness" (i.e. experiencing periods of six or more months without being in school, having a job, or being married) among emerging adults (Besharov, 1999). This form of "disconnection" is experienced by approximately 25% of youth whose parents do not have a high school diploma, 30% of youth living below the federal poverty line, and more than one-third of youth from families receiving welfare (Brown & Emig, 1999).

Research is accumulating on the influence of welfare-reliant environments and work-reliant environments on child outcomes. However, much of the research looks at 1) the transition from welfare to work, a body of research that has increased substantially since the passage of welfare reform in 1996 (e.g., Chase-Lansdale, Moffit, Lohman, Cherlin, Coley, Pittman, Roff, & Votruba-Drzal, 2003; Tout, Scarpa, & Zaslow, 2002); 2) child outcomes that do not encompass emerging adulthood (e.g., Duncan, Dunifon, Doran, & Yeung, 2001) or 3) samples that do not directly compare the two groups (e.g., Orthner & Randolph, 1999).

In Orthner and Randolph's (1999) low-income sample the highest high school dropout rates (61.7%) were found for adolescents whose parents remained on welfare throughout the entire study, while the lowest dropout rates (48.5%) were found for adolescents whose parents stopped receiving welfare. They also found that the risk for dropout was 25% greater if families received welfare benefits in more months, while dropout was 17% less for youths whose parents worked in more quarters. Yet, the authors point out that even the lower dropout rates for youths whose families have worked are considerably higher than dropout rates for middle-class youth. Similarly, Chase-Lansdale and colleagues (2003) looked at the effect of work/welfare cycling for young children and adolescents. They found that mothers' gaining employment and leaving welfare were not related to negative outcomes for either group. There were even some tenta-

tive positive findings: having a mother working led to improvements in teens' mental health, reduced drug and alcohol use, and improved cognitive achievement, while leaving work was related to increases in teens' depressive and aggressive behaviors. However, outcomes were only assessed at 16 months after these changes occurred. Though not focusing on outcomes related to emerging adulthood, Tout, Scarpa, and Zaslow (2002) looked at welfare leavers, welfare stayers, and poor families who did not receive welfare within the prior two years. Tout and colleagues found that children of current recipients and recent leavers were more likely than other poor children to have physical, learning, or mental health conditions that limited activity. Though these studies provide some initial examination of how parental welfare or employment affects youth, they do not directly address the influence of varied childhood economic experiences on later transitions to adulthood.

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1993) outlined a conceptual framework that describes how human development is influenced by the environment. This framework proposes that the balance of environmental forces and personal characteristics is determinant of outcomes. Since development takes place through a reciprocal process between the person and the environment, children are influenced by the context in which they are raised. Research as outlined above has examined this development in the context of poverty; however, Bronfenbrenner's (1988) person-process-context paradigm suggests that a child's environment would not only be influenced by poverty, but also the processes in which the poverty occurs. As Bronfenbrenner outlines, the environment provides constraints and opportunities, but does not dictate behavior. Parents in poverty are forced to adapt to their situation and make choices about welfare use and work that have consequences for their children. It is this reciprocal process of environmental constraints and individual choices that is the subject of this study. Using Bronfenbrenner's model, we are specifically interested in investigating whether parental decisions made under the constraints of poverty, creating a specific household context (work-reliant or welfare-reliant), affects their children during emerging

adulthood. Given this framework, one would expect, despite living below the poverty level, that outcomes for children who were raised in families where work was the source of income would differ from outcomes for children whose families relied primarily on income from welfare.

Methods

The first and second waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) were used for this analysis (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988). The NSFH is an ongoing longitudinal dataset comprising interviews with adults (Wave 1 and Wave 2) and children (Wave 2). The NSFH used a representative probability sample of households with one adult main respondent selected per household randomly (9,643 interviews). An additional double sampling was used to insure adequate numbers of respondents from underrepresented groups (3,374 interviews), including ethnic minorities, single parent households, families with stepchildren, and cohabiting and newly married couples. This resulted in 13,017 adult Wave 1interviews between 1987 and 1988. The second wave of data was collected in 1992 through 1994 and contains follow-up interviews with 10,007 primary respondents (82% follow-up rate) from the original sample and a sample of children (n=2,505) who were between the ages of 5 and 18 in Wave 1 (Sweet & Bumpass, 1996).

This analysis focuses on the 1,090 focal children interviewed in the second wave of data collection who were between the ages of 18 and 23 (ages 13 through 18 in Wave 1). The older focal children interviews had a response rate of 71% (Musick & Bumpass, 1998). For this analysis we used youth from the full dataset who were out of high school and for whom there was sufficient parent and income data (n=835) and a subsample of focal children at or below 200% of poverty (n=182). Poverty level was determined using the NSFH poverty variable multiplied by two. Total family income, supplied by the NSFH, was then compared to the 200% cutoff.

Demographic variables. Primary respondent variables included age, race, family structure (i.e., whether or not the parents were

married at the time of the child's birth), and educational attainment. Using Wave 1 data, parents' educational level was categorized into less than a high school education, a high school degree, and having some college education. Focal child variables included age, gender, and whether or not they have children. Information regarding race/ethnicity was only collected for the primary respondent (parent).

Public assistance. Public assistance was defined in the NSFH as welfare, AFDC, general assistance, food stamps, and emergency assistance. Two predictor variables relating to public assistance were included in this analysis: 1) if the family of the focal child had ever received public assistance; and 2) the number of years the focal child's family had received public assistance. Families were categorized as having been on public assistance at any time if the primary respondent in Waves 1 and 2 responded that they had received public assistance in a given year. The total number of years the focal child's family had received public assistance was calculated by counting the number of times the primary respondent listed a year as one in which they had received public assistance.

Income variables. Income is examined in four ways: 1) total family income; 2) percentage of total family income from public assistance; 3) percentage of total family income from employment; and 4) total family income as a percentage of the poverty line. For total family income, the sum of all income from related individuals in a household was aggregated. The first step in producing the percentage of total income represented by public assistance income was to sum the income from public assistance of all related individuals in a household. This public assistance income variable was then divided by the total family income to get a percent of total income represented by public assistance. The percentage of total family income from employment was calculated in the same way. Income as a percentage of the poverty line was calculated by dividing the total family income by the poverty line data supplied in the Wave 1 data.

Work history. Parental work history was determined by examining the total months the responding parent had worked during the youth's childhood. This was divided by the child's age to

obtain an average number of months worked during the child's life. Average months per year are included as a variable in several analyses.

Outcome variables. Five outcome variables were used: 1) public assistance use; 2) high school dropout; 3) college attendance; 4) idleness; and 5) income. The focal child's receipt of public assistance income is defined as any amount of money received from AFDC, food stamps, general assistance or other forms of public assistance in the 12 months prior to the second wave interview. Though the sample included youth who were 17 in the 12 months prior to their interview and therefore ineligible for certain categories of public assistance, these youth were still eligible for public assistance for their children; since the majority of youth on public assistance were parents, these youth would be included if they received public assistance for their children. In addition, the percentage of 18-year-old youth on public assistance (approximately 8%) was consistent with the other age groups and did not appear to be underrepresented in the public assistance outcome. Respondents who listed any income or responded that they were unsure of the amount of income they received from public assistance are included in this category. There were 97 individuals (8.9% of the sample) classified as receiving public assistance. The education level attained by the focal child at Wave 2 is based on questions asking whether a child had obtained various types of education or received a diploma or GED. The idleness variable was created using several supplied variables: currently in high school or college, currently working, and active in the military. Any focal child who was not in high school, was not in college, was not in the military, and was not working was labeled idle. Income was the sum of all of the income for the focal child at Wave 2.

Data analyses included descriptive statistics (i.e., frequencies and percentages), as well as chi-square and t-tests. They were used to summarize and analyze the data and to compare the full sample to the poverty-only sample. Linear and logistic regression were used to determine factors associated with outcomes related to the transition to adulthood: education, income, idleness, and public assistance use.

Results

Sample Description

As stated earlier, the analysis relied on both the full sample (n=835) of NSFH focal children and a poverty-only sample (n=182). Demographic information for both samples is provided in Table 1.

The two samples were significantly different in terms of race, responding parent's age, responding parent's educational status, family income, family public assistance use, and family structure at child's birth. As would be expected, the poverty sample had a larger percentage of minorities, a higher percentage of public assistance use, a lower percentage of college graduates, and a lower percentage of families that were married at the time of the focal child's birth.

Bivariate Analyses

Preliminary analyses were conducted to examine bivariate associations between poverty, childhood welfare use, and transition outcomes. Specifically, chi-square analyses and t-tests, displayed in Table 2, show group differences for the full sample in transition outcomes based on childhood poverty. Consistent with previous literature, results suggest that poverty in childhood (being at or below 200% of the poverty line) is associated with lower educational attainment, increased use of public assistance, and youth idleness in early adulthood. Results are similar when evaluating childhood poverty using the poverty line as the indicator.

Similarly, as shown in Table 3, family welfare use during childhood is associated with more negative outcomes during the transition to adulthood. Chi-square analysis and a t-test were used to assess group differences in transition outcomes for youth whose families had a history of being on welfare and youth who did not. Significant differences were found in educational attainment, youth public assistance use, and youth idleness during this transition period.

To investigate the association between welfare and work context and transition outcomes, bivariate analyses were also conducted. High school dropouts had significantly more years on

Table 1

Demographic Information for Full and Poverty Sample

		Full Sample (n=835)	*Poverty Sample (n=182)*	*Significance Test*
Child characteristics				
Age	Mean (SD)	20.7 (1.8)	20.5 (1.7)	P=.07
Gender	Male	48.1%	44.5%	P=.27
	Female	51.9%	55.5%	
Family characteristics				
Race	White	80.8%	62.4%	P<.0001
	Black	12.5%	22.1%	
	Hispanic	6.1%	13.8%	
	Asian	0.6%	1.7%	
Responding parent 's age at child's birth	Mean (SD)	26.9 (6.1)	26.0 (7.2)	P=.05
Responding parent's educational attainment	Did not complete high school	13.2%	28%	P<.0001
	H.S. graduate	41.9%	48.4%	
	Some college or more	44.9%	23.6%	
Family income at Wave 1	Mean	$42,398.78	$11,485.39	P<.0001
	(SD)	(51154.83)	(6552.03)	
Family public assistance use	Ever on public assistance	12.0%	34.1%	P<.0001
Family intact at birth	Biological parents married at child's birth	81.0%	69.2%	P<.0001

Table 2

Transition Characteristics among Youth Based on Childhood Poverty Status

		Youth at/below 200% poverty	*Youth above 200% poverty*	*Significance Test*
Educational Attainment	HS dropout	15.4%	5.2%	P<.0001
	HS graduate	36.3%	26.2%	
	Some college or more	48.4%	68.6%	
Youth Public Assistance		13.2%	6.3%	P<.01
Youth Idleness		28.0%	19.5%	P<.01
Mean Youth Income		$8,806 (SD=10190)	$9,707 (SD=10144)	P=.29

Table 3

Transition Characteristics among Youth Based on Childhood Welfare Status

		Family history of welfare use	*No family welfare history*	*Significance Test*
Educational Attainment	HS dropout	16.0%	6.3%	P<.0001
	HS graduate	44.0%	26.3%	
	Some college or more	40%	67.5%	
Youth Public Assistance		23.0%	5.7%	P<.0001
Youth Idleness		29.0%	20.3%	P<.05
Mean Youth Income		$8,338 (SD=9605)	$9,670 (SD=10264)	P=.22

welfare in childhood (t=–2.26, p=.03), a significantly higher percentage of their family's income coming from welfare (t=–1.99, p=.05), and a significantly lower percentage of their family's income coming from work (t=2.52, p=.01) than non-high school dropouts. Other differences in educational attainment were associated with years spent on public assistance during childhood, the percentage of family income from work, and the percentage of family income from public assistance. Similar differences were

also found among youth on public assistance in early adulthood; their families spent more years on welfare in childhood ($t=-3.67$, $p<.001$), a significantly higher percentage of their family's income came from welfare ($t=-3.09$, $p<.01$), and a significantly lower percentage of their family's income came from work ($t=2.68$, $p<.01$) compared to youth not on public assistance. The only aspect of the welfare/work context that was significantly associated with youth idleness was percentage of family income from public assistance ($t=-2.13$, $p=.03$). In addition, only years on public assistance during childhood was predictive of youth income during this transition period ($t=-2.61$, $p<.01$).

Bivariate analyses were also conducted using the poverty-only sample (n=182). For this sample, family welfare use was associated with high school dropout ($X^2=3.74$, $p=.05$), welfare use in early adulthood ($X^2=13.08$, $p<.001$), and idleness ($X^2=3.84$, $p=.05$). Welfare/work context variables were only associated with later youth welfare use. Specifically, the number of years on welfare ($t=-3.41$, $p<.01$), the percentage of income from earnings ($t=2.81$, $p<.01$), and the percentage of income from public assistance ($t=-3.08$, $p<.01$) were associated with welfare use in early adulthood.

Multivariate Analyses Using Full Sample

To investigate the effect of the childhood context on transition outcomes, a series of multiple regressions were conducted. These analyses, shown in Table 4, examined the influence of poverty and family welfare use on transition outcomes. These models utilized general indicators of poverty and welfare use in early adulthood. Youth characteristics, including gender, age, parenthood, and educational level, and parental characteristics, including race, educational level, and marital status at birth were controlled. Logistic models that examined high school dropout, college attendance, youth public assistance, and youth idleness, as well as a linear model examining youth income, are also presented.

Results from these analyses indicated that childhood poverty was statistically associated with high rates of high school dropout and decreased college attendance even after controlling for other variables. Family public assistance use was found to significantly increase the likelihood of a youth being on public

Table 4

Full Sample Multiple Regressions of Youth Public Assistance, High School Dropout, College Attendance, Idleness, and Income

		Youth Outcomes				
Predictor Variables		*Welfare Use (OR)*	*High School Dropout (OR)*	*College Attendance (OR)*	*Idleness (OR)*	*Income Logged (Parameter estimate)*
Youth Characteristics						
Gender	Female	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
	Male	0.32**	1.45	0.61**	0.88	1.55**
Age		0.82*	0.92	1.16**	1.02	0.30**
Have children		8.5**	8.84**	0.13**	1.89**	–1.62**
Educational level	H.S. dropout	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
	H.S. graduate	0.41*	N/A	N/A	0.67	1.58**
	College	1.03	N/A	N/A	0.31**	–0.21
Live at home		2.09*	0.77	1.33	1.03	–0.21
Family/Parent Characteristics						
Race	White	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
	Black	1.26	0.57	1.52	0.95	–0.86*
	Other	0.55	0.48	3.46**	0.92	–1.05
Parent's education	H.S. dropout	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
	H.S. graduate	0.63	0.29**	1.03	0.64	–0.16
	College	0.68	0.33**	2.99	0.94	–0.65
Family intact at child's birth		0.66	1.05	1.11*	0.68	0.46
Family ever on public assistance		3.25**	1.42	0.52*	0.97	–0.44
Family at/below 200% poverty		0.87	2.21*	0.64*	1.11	0.09

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

assistance during early adulthood and decrease the likelihood of college attendance. Other predictors of negative outcomes in the transition to adulthood were being a parent while a young adult, not having a high school diploma, and low parental educational attainment. Not surprisingly, being a parent during this time period was strongly associated with all of the negative youth outcomes that were investigated.

Additional analyses were then conducted for the full sample to examine whether the welfare/work context as indicated by the number of years on public assistance, the average number of months a parent worked, the percent of income from public assistance, and the percent of income from work, had an impact on transition outcomes when controlling for other variables. In each analysis, the welfare/work context variables proved to be insignificant. General indicators of poverty and welfare use predicted youth transition outcomes, but these more specific context variables did not.

Multivariate Analyses Using Poverty Sample

Since the overall sample (n=835) had less than 22% poor young adults, it may have been difficult to uncover the effects of the welfare/work context using this sample. The effects of these more specific context indicators may have been masked in this larger sample. To further assess whether a work-reliant or welfare-reliant environment had an effect on transition outcomes, additional analyses examined a sample of youth who were at or below 200% of the poverty line (n=182).

In Table 5, results for the poverty-only sample are presented. When examining this limited sample, results again indicate that growing up in a welfare-reliant or work-reliant environment is not associated with different outcomes. In all key transition outcomes the number of years the youth's family spent on public assistance, parent's work history, amount of family income from work, and amount of family income from public assistance were insignificant.

Having a child during early adulthood predicted negative outcomes in all five markers of the transition period. Gender, youth educational attainment, and parent educational attainment were also related to transition outcomes.

Table 5

Poverty Sample Multiple Regressions of Youth Public Assistance, High School Dropout, College Attendance, Idleness, and Income

Predictor Variables		*Youth Outcomes*				
		Welfare Use (OR)	*High School Dropout (OR)*	*College Attendance (OR)*	*Idleness (OR)*	*Income Logged (Parameter estimate)*
Youth Characteristics						
Gender	Female	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
	Male	0.06**	1.21	0.52	0.49	2.80**
Age		0.89	1.00	0.99	1.12	0.12
Have children		6.50*	5.38**	0.18**	2.83*	–2.01**
Educational level	H.S. dropout	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
	H.S. graduate	0.22	N/A	N/A	1.51	1.74*
	College	1.78	N/A	N/A	0.18**	0.23
Live at home		4.46	0.91	1.20	1.17	–0.05
Family/Parent Characteristics						
Race	White	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
	Black	1.19	0.38	1.16	1.85	–0.87
	Other	0.48	0.82	2.40	2.22	–0.84
Parent's education	H.S. dropout	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
	H.S. graduate	0.35	0.58	1.01	0.67	–0.29
	College	0.72	.057	2.99*	1.65	–0.13
Family intact at child's birth		2.64	0.98	0.93	2.09	–0.74
Family ever on public assistance		1.56	1.82	0.64	1.63	0.19
Years on public assistance		1.29	0.99	1.03	0.94	–0.09
Average months parent worked		1.07	1.00	1.02	0.96	0.09
Public assistance as a percent of family income		4.72	1.51	0.66	3.50	–1.39
Earnings from work as a percent of family income		2.91	0.87	0.79	3.77	–2.14

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Discussion

Few studies have addressed the specific effect of welfare-reliant or work-reliant environments on an adolescent's transition to adulthood. This study filled this gap by examining how parental work history, family welfare use during childhood, and the amount of income from welfare and work were associated with specific indicators of successful transitions into early adulthood. Relying on the ecological model, which suggests that humans develop through a reciprocal process with the environment and that these interactions vary based on both the individual and the particular environment (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1993), would indicate that poverty, as well as the context in which it occurred, would affect childhood development.

Research has consistently demonstrated the strong influence poverty has on child development, including mental and physical health, school performance, and less successful transitions to adulthood (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sherman, 1997; Vandivere, et al., 2000). Consistent with such research, this study found childhood poverty was associated with lower rates of college attendance and higher rates of high school dropout. In addition, family welfare use was associated with a child's welfare use in early adulthood.

Though this study showed additional evidence of links between poverty and childhood outcomes, it was unable to establish a link between the context of this poverty and these outcomes. Specifically, growing up in a welfare-reliant or work-reliant environment did not have a differential effect on poor children's outcomes in the transition to adulthood. Whether the welfare or work context was measured by time or by source of income did not influence the results; this was true in both the full sample and the poverty sample. This may suggest that the ecological context of poverty is so strong that it is detrimental to child development regardless of other factors. In addition, Bronfenbrenner (1988) suggests that environmental factors will affect individuals in different ways, therefore indicating that a work-oriented household may be beneficial for some youth, but neutral for others. These outcomes also imply that attempts to put parents to work without alleviating their poverty may do little to produce

better outcomes for their children, as prior studies indicate that about 50 to 75% of individuals exiting welfare are below the poverty level (Danziger, et al., 2002; Moffit & Roff, 2000). Similar to previous findings (Morris & Gennetian, 2003), changes in income level rather than parental employment affect child outcomes. For welfare-reliant mothers who do return to work, various costs, including decreased time with children, overtiredness, less energy when with children, parental absence and its relation to child behavior, and childcare, are offset primarily by increased income (London, Scott, Edin, & Hunter, 2004). Without income increases, work may yield little benefit to these families. For youth living in poverty, it appears not to be the extent of the welfare or work environment that influences transition outcomes, but rather another set of factors related to their educational attainment, gender, parent's educational attainment, and choices about early parenting.

Findings from this study have several implications for welfare policy. Policies currently aimed at increasing self-sufficiency should also seek to improve youth outcomes in emerging adulthood if they hope to decrease future welfare dependency. Programs that focus on the antecedents to idleness, low income, low educational attainment, and public assistance use during the transition to adulthood would be better able to end the cycle of poverty than programs aimed solely at putting parents to work. Welfare policymakers should seek to understand and target programs at the barriers that impoverished youth face during this critical period of development. Further, work-first approaches may not be enough to adequately influence youth outcomes.

Alleviating poverty seems to be a key factor in influencing these outcomes. One potential program component that works to decrease poverty, earned income disregards, has been evaluated. The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), implemented pre-welfare reform to test earned income disregards, increased employment and earnings and reduced poverty (Gennetian, Knox, & Miller, 2000). The MFIP findings are important because over 40 states incorporated such disregards post-reform. These evaluations further demonstrate that it is the increase in income that benefits children and not the employment, per se.

Furthermore, having children predicted negative outcomes in

the transition to adulthood in every multiple regression model. This suggests that more should be done to curb teen childbearing. Abstinence-only education has not been effective; in fact, most of the education has been regarded as "barely adequate to completely inadequate" (Howell, 2001, p. 1). Effective sex education programs should combine three common attributes: 1) clearly focusing on sexual behavior and contraceptive use; 2) sending a clear message that abstaining from sex is the safest choice for teens; and 3) if the teenager is sexually active, promoting the use of protection against STDs and pregnancy (Kirby, 2001).

This study provides some insight into the influence of welfare and work contexts on the transition to adulthood for impoverished youth; however, these findings are limited. First, it is important to understand that these data were collected in the pre-welfare reform era (i.e., pre-1996). This means that the population on welfare was not exposed to the same sanctions, time limits, and work requirements as today's welfare population. In today's environment, people with the ability to work are moved into the workforce while those who remain on welfare may be characteristically less capable of work due to increased occupational and vocational barriers (e.g. Moffit, et al., 2002).

This suggests that in the pre-welfare reform era, parents who left welfare for work were better off than those people working today; they were working based on choice and ability, rather than government requirements. Recent research suggests that for women who are required to work based on state work requirements, employment during their child's early years is associated with negative outcomes, while for mothers living in states without such requirements returning to work voluntarily is associated with positive outcomes (Brady-Smith, 2002). If a work-reliant environment is more beneficial for children, this fact should have been more apparent during the pre-welfare reform era when parents transitioned from welfare to work voluntarily. Since the data did not show this effect, this may be a stronger indication that work programs that people experience today are even less likely to have an effect on their children.

A second limitation in this study is that the NSFH data, though longitudinal, may not present an entirely accurate picture of family income. Data collected at only a few interviews may

not be representative of a family's entire income history over the lifetime of the study. To overcome this limitation, we used the number of years on welfare and average months worked during the child's life in addition to point in time estimates to gauge poverty.

A third limitation relates to the fact that the transition to adulthood is a long-term, ongoing process, lasting from ages 18–25 (Arnett, 2000). Though all of the youth in this study were 18–23, the youth who were 18 had less time to experience the transition outcomes being assessed. Though attempts were made to control for this using multivariate analysis, the analysis cannot predict what youth will experience as they continue to move through their transition. Recently released data from the third wave of the NSFH, conducted in 2001–2002, when youth were 27–32, will provide further insight into the youth's transition experiences.

Despite these limitations, this study makes a valuable contribution by illuminating the shortcomings of a work-first welfare policy. Putting people to work without alleviating poverty may not, in fact, be helping the next generation to more successfully transition into their adult lives. Policies that work toward alleviating poverty, decreasing teen pregnancy, and helping impoverished youth overcome barriers to successful adulthood may be more effective than policies that put parents to work and expect parental work to be sufficient to change youth experiences. Further research should examine what programs would successfully aid in this transition and how to assist low-income youth to more successfully negotiate this transition.

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